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## What is Pilgrimage? A Report of the Panel at the 2017 Symposium on Pilgrimage Studies, William & Mary, October 7, 2017

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## What is Pilgrimage?

### A Report of the Panel at the 2017 Symposium on Pilgrimage Studies, William & Mary, October 7, 2017

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*In its most basic sense, we conceive of pilgrimage as a journey to a special place, in which both the journey and the destination have spiritual significance to the journeyer (Davidson & Gitlitz, 2002, 1: xvii).*

*A journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding (Barber, 1993: 1).*

*Today, pilgrimage is defined differently, as a traditional religious or modern secular journey (Collins-Kreiner, 2010: 440).*

*Pilgrimage is perhaps best defined as a departure from daily life on a journey in search of spiritual well-being (Bradley, 2009: 11).*

*. . . pilgrimage is a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal (Morinis, 1992: 4).*

*The point of it all is to get out, go forth, to a holy place (Turner & Turner, 1978: 7).*

*The definition of the term 'pilgrimage' is in need of re-evaluation (Margry, 2008: 13).*

We can define pilgrimage in many ways, as these few examples illustrate. But pilgrimage resists reduction to a simple definition. At the 2017 *Symposium on Pilgrimage Studies* at William & Mary, a panel of distinguished scholars confronted the question 'What is Pilgrimage?' from distinct, independent vantage points. In our shared introduction to this special issue, the panelists summarize the key points of their framing presentations, and anticipate the invited essays that further redefine intentional travel and rethink the specific instances their colleagues have studied.

George Greenia opened the discussion by trying to build a suite of characteristics that mark instances of lived pilgrimage across cultures, and by proposing a self-critical 'triage' to identify what only approximates fully intentional travel. Next Ian McIntosh explained in a case study from China during the Cultural Revolution that traditional definitions of pilgrimage leave out its personal and transformational nature. Finally, Moore

Quinn closed the panel by pointing out that human movement - whether pilgrimage or not - is a universal norm imbued with symbolic importance.

#### **George D. Greenia, Performing Triage on What We Call Pilgrimage**

There are many answers to 'What is Pilgrimage?' that converge, compete and to some extent overlap. Researchers are compelled to make distinctions according to their methodological tools and disciplinary boundary markers. That can get awkward when, for fear of being judgmental, they hesitate to discount anyone's claim to being a pilgrim of some sort. The frustrations are now endemic in many fields of study: when everything is 'pilgrimage', nothing is pilgrimage.

In another essay in this issue ambitiously titled 'What is Pilgrimage?' I try to focus on the premises that seem to surround instances of lived pilgrimage in various

cultures. This intercultural pattern of behaviors functions as a set of experiences pilgrims seek and embrace, and my essay suggests a suite of characteristics that reinforce the sense that one has made a journey of enduring value.

In the past few decades, however, casual conversation and much in the popular press have extended the notion of thoughtful travel to displacements that are less than self-aware, sometimes routinized to the point of mindlessness. We move around so much we almost need to grasp at any banner that will ennoble our wandering, much of it admittedly frivolous. Especially for Westerners unwilling to let go of their creature comforts or their ironic detachment from belief systems, 'pilgrimage' becomes a tag descriptor for travel that's *not* just fidgeting for entertainment. Honest. Or as one journalist quipped, 'It's hard to be a true pilgrim in a latte world.'

The very lack of strict borders on the notion of pilgrimage has labeled widely different forms of peripatetic behaviors as 'intentional travel' in order to redeem restlessness and give it an honorable name. It seems ungenerous to police what counts as pilgrimage. There is frequent tension between those who insist that 'a true pilgrim' meets specific criteria, and those who find self-flattering comparisons invidious. And there are political urgings as well: does pilgrimage overlap with migration, involuntary exile because of famine or war, tribal nomadism, even homelessness? Can the vulnerable displaced person find shelter under a more pious designation?

When we met in Williamsburg in October, 2017 at the annual Symposium sponsored by the William & Mary Institute for Pilgrimage Studies, I tried to name four sorts of 'triage' that we should probably keep in mind to recognize when definitional boundaries are melting away.

The first triage is to fess up to runaway metaphors. Journalism is clogged with them; our conversations caked with them. The *New Yorker* magazine runs a periodic gag note called 'Block that Metaphor' and gathers embarrassing examples from media outlets large and small. The occasional funny mishmash - someone, say, 'sweating bullets and shooting themselves in the foot with them' - is not the problem. It's when a borrowed image such as 'being under pressure' expands to validate entire psychic states. We routinely talk about emotions being bottled up, people needing to vent, providing an escape valve, or someone

about to explode. But psychologists with any clinical experience will tell you that human beings are not steam engines, teapots, or pressure cookers. Giving yourself and others casual permission for explosive behaviors often pushes troubled emotional states toward unnecessary extremes, which in turn becomes corrosive for self-image, throws a monkey wrench in your personal psychic management, and wounds innocent bystanders.

Much the same could be laid out for runaway metaphors which justify themselves by a vague association with evolutionary theory. We talk about 'evolving' language forms, economies, musical styles and social customs. But these are behavioral phenomena, social constructs and conventions. None obeys the laws of biological evolution. Many allusions to changes in behavior over time just cloak themselves in the authoritative discourse of science and make an unjustified claim to be dealing in predictable mechanisms of cause and effect.

Pilgrimage has become another unmonitored and much beloved runaway metaphor. Everyone is 'on a journey.' A recent Master's thesis on *Metaphors pilgrims live by* (Valdini, 2007) runs 132 pages and is not exhaustive.<sup>[1]</sup> Movement morphs into a cypher for inner change. The traveler's displacement is a gesture that succeeds: you push out from who you were and can declare yourself someone new. Even the dense social script of acts and attitudes that surrounds the popular Camino de Santiago simply encodes an allegorical performance: 'The Road to Compostela is nothing but a metaphor' (Melczer, 1993: 23).

Of course, any linguistic philosopher will immediately point out that language is nothing *but* metaphor. All the more reason to recognize when metaphors are directing our thought rather than illustrating it. There is ultimately no way to avoid anxious swaying between those postures but we cannot pretend they're not there and still make critical distinctions when we need to.

A second form of triage is required to free pilgrimage from its coincidental benefits. There are many forms of modern malaise for which pilgrimage offers an apparent remedy. It tends to be truly body-centered, encourages travelers to disconnect, promises a digital detox, and often urges them to lay aside their usual social identities and try on others.

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1. Valdini surveys two matrices of metaphor, that life is a journey and 'a network of economic metaphors of moral accounting' (2009: v).

There is a third form of triage needed to distinguish pilgrimage from its societal utility. Intentional travel does encourage reverence for other cultures and, as Ian McIntosh repeatedly explains (2017), in theaters of persistent ethnic and tribal conflict, pilgrimage welcomes opponents to ascend to common heights. This sort of ‘peace in a bottle’ may politely elide hostilities that would arise in other travel circumstances and remind fellow pilgrims of a higher order of human unity. It aspires to create a classless society, and sometimes delivers precisely that.

Our appreciation of pilgrimage is too often reduced to issues of instrumentality. Will acts of pilgrimage ‘get something done?’ Leaving room for the transcendent to happen can be an unsatisfying plea. One student’s mother called once to beg me to let her son join our study group on the Camino de Santiago because he was lost and needed a transformative experience. I had to remind her that transformation wasn’t a deliverable: he’d earn the credit hours but maybe come home unchanged.

In the end, longing for transformation hovers as the aspirational goal of much intentional travel and certainly of all pilgrimage. That longing may be the most stable feature we have for recognizing the voyager who hopes to be a pilgrim. One audience respondent during the 2017 Williamsburg Symposium pointed out with gentle insight that this implicit promise of ‘transcendence always seems to come riding in on its white horse to save the day.’

It doesn’t.

But I would still defend saving space for the transcendent to emerge for some travelers. The old preachers’ dictum is probably right: ‘Although we all seek transcendence, encountering it is an accident. Religions give us practices. But with practice, we can become accident prone.’

### **Ian S. McIntosh, The Journey Within a Journey Within a Journey**

Anthropologists speak about the search for universal truths of the human condition. Might we consider pilgrimage in this same light? Pilgrims (and pilgrimage scholars) often describe their lives as a journey. The implication is that they are headed somewhere, somewhere distant, whether in this world or that which is to come. However, at journey’s end, if they were to find themselves at the same place from which they had embarked, poet T.S. Eliot (1959) says they will see that place as if for the very first time. That is because a transformation has taken place. A metamorphosis.

They are not the same person as at the beginning of their earthly voyage.

Leaving behind the routines of everyday life and embarking on a pilgrimage provide an opportunity for insight into this process of becoming. It might be from doubt to clarity, emptiness to fulfillment, joy to exultation, injustice to justice, a thousand things. In his Camino, the medieval alchemist Nicholas Flamel was not interested in reflecting on his mortality. He was in search of the secret of immortality. Stories about the pursuit of the elixir of life or fountain of youth are about transcending the yin and yang of our daily existence, or the cycles of birth and death. The very origins of pilgrimage may lie with such whimsical or heartfelt quests. For the most part, though, if it is not immortality one seeks, then perhaps through pilgrimage we can find the serenity, courage and wisdom that American theologian Reinhold Niebohr refers to in his famous serenity prayer:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things  
I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.*

(Shapiro, 2008)

While pilgrimage is an intensely personal affair, it is often integral to how a community defines itself. In many instances, pilgrimage is also the backbone of the local economy. Consider the many industries associated with pilgrimage, such as hotels, food production, restaurants, souvenirs, and museums. At any point of time, businesses are opening or closing, and expanding or stagnating, with fluctuating pilgrim numbers. Similarly, we cannot separate the pilgrim and the community in which the pilgrimage is embedded from the socio-economic and political journey of the broader region, which is similarly undergoing change. With this threefold dimension of pilgrimage in mind, we can define the phenomenon as a journey within a journey within a journey.

The complexity of the varied paths of transformation at these three levels almost defies comparative study. Think of the contrasts at play when we look simply at the act of pilgrimage in cross-cultural perspective in three settings. In the midst of a vast crowd, the pilgrim in India is seeking just a few seconds alone and eye-to-eye with their deity. *Communitas* and camaraderie play second fiddle in this experience. Then think of the character played by the actor Martin Sheen in the movie ‘The Way’ and his life-transforming discovery of community on the Camino. A third example comes from a pilgrim in China in the 1800s. He had walked

and bowed for over a hundred miles between two sacred Buddhist sites over a period of more than a year to ensure that his ancestors had a better rebirth in the western heaven. These are all very different journeys offering vastly dissimilar experiences for the pilgrim. In the first, the company of strangers is unimportant. In the second, one's fellow pilgrims are a critical part of the experience. In the third, pilgrimage is an exercise in self-sacrifice centered on the well-being of others.

How easy is it to fit pilgrimage into a single definition? Pilgrimage scholar George Greenia argues that the very nature of the phenomenon and the different disciplinary approaches to the topic pose a major challenge. The popular usage of the term is also confusing. This ranges from the trivial, like a visit to one's favorite pizzeria, to the ruminations of people like ethnologist Richard Dawkins who uses the term pilgrimage to describe the evolutionary journey of the human species as a whole.

A short narrative from Cultural Revolution-era China highlights the dimensions of pilgrimage that are often overlooked in definitions, including those at the start of this essay, that prioritize the idea of a journey, a destination, and a ritual. Key words that I want to highlight are delight, devotion (one's own or someone else's) discovery (including self-discovery) and destiny.

Let us go back in time to the 1960s in communist China to the days of militant atheism (Yuan, 1988) to hear about a pilgrimage that grew out of the experience of a musician in love with the works of Ludwig Beethoven. Prior to the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Beethoven had been China's most popular classical musician. There was something about his personality, hardships and deafness that inspired many Chinese devotees (Cai and Melvin, 2015).

During the revolution, authorities outlawed the public performance of Beethoven's music (Predota, 2017). As art had to serve politics, listening to classical music for mere personal pleasure was a punishable offence. Communists viewed many such western influences as counter-revolutionary. The loyal citizen would instead be guided by the words of Chairman Mao Zedong in his 'Little Red Book' and direct their passions to the struggles of the proletariat.

This is the story of the dissident, Lu Hongen, who was a conductor with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. Lu did not just like Beethoven; he worshipped him, and so his arrest on the charge of opposing the revolution was inevitable. Lu viewed the national crackdown on

his personal freedoms as intolerable and he fought back first with his baton and then from his jail cell. He would continually hum Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* (Solemn Mass), infuriating his captors. First, they tried to dissuade him with words, but when that did not work, they resorted to torture. When he refused to stop invoking Beethoven's famous tunes, those in power made the decision to have him executed. On that fateful day, he made an agreement with his cellmate. Upon release, that cellmate would do two things. First, he would find Hongen's son and tell him what had transpired. Second, he would go to Vienna, in Austria, to Beethoven's grave, and tell the master composer that his Chinese disciple was humming the *Missa Solemnis* as he went to his execution (Predota, 2017).

My Chinese colleagues at Indiana University told me that his son actually made that journey to Vienna. Now that is a pilgrimage!

The Cultural Revolution officially ended in 1976, but perhaps the real end came in 1977 when the Central Philharmonic Orchestra performed Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in Shanghai. It was a signal to the Chinese people that change was at hand, and that the country was opening itself to the world.

This is a story of many parts: delight in the music of the master composer; devotion to his spirit of freedom and creativity; discovery on the part of the son, and of course destiny - for all involved. The traditional definition of pilgrimage as a long journey to a sacred place for religious reasons leaves out so much of what is inside, deeply personal and transformative at so many levels. Pilgrimage is a journey within a journey, within a journey. The politics of the day cut short Lu Hongen's own life and pilgrimage through music, but the journey, nevertheless, continues in ways that we cannot yet begin to imagine.

### **E. Moore Quinn, From the Panhellenic Games to Graceland: The Meaning of Human Pilgrimage**

As is clear from the contributions of my esteemed colleagues Drs. Greenia and McIntosh, scholars approach definitions of pilgrimage from a variety of perspectives. Peter Margry (2008: 35) contributes to the definition dilemma by noting that there is a persistent shortfall among our routinely traded pilgrimage concepts; he suggests that, because pilgrimage holds different meanings for different pilgrims, there is no way to avoid an interdisciplinary approach to the phenomenon. On the other hand, received wisdom also suggests that pilgrimage might

best be understood as ‘an arena for competing religious and secular discourses’ (Eade and Sallnow, 1991: 2; cf. Kruse, 2003: 56). That is why I called my talk at the Symposium ‘From the Panhellenic Games to Graceland: The Meaning of Human Pilgrimage’; I wished to convey the variety of approaches and the wide lenses undertaken in pilgrimage scholarship.

Greenia situates the subject broadly, offering cautionary tales that remind us not to be overly wooed by ‘stand ins’ for pilgrimage; McIntosh, on the other hand, weaves narratives that enable us to understand the plethora of experiences that have motivated – and continue to motivate – pilgrims to embark upon their paths and journeys.

For my part, I approached the question ‘What is pilgrimage?’ by pointing out two universals: first, I stressed that, no matter where humans are in the world, they *move*. Second, drawing upon Clifford Geertz’s insight that ‘man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has’ (Geertz, 1973: 5), I emphasized that, as meaning makers, humans imbue their movements with symbolic importance. I proceeded then to consider historical, linguistic and cultural frameworks – the sturdy tools of the linguistic anthropologist – as they relate to special human movement.

In ancient Greece, for instance, the term *theoroi* denoted persons who journeyed abroad to an oracle, holy place or sacred site to ‘take in’ a variety of activities: artistic performances, athletic competitions, festivals, processions, rituals, and even sacrifices. Eventually, both events and practices became reverentially habitual:

. . . since the time when sanctuaries first [became] important as areas of interstate cooperation in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., this prestige [of going forth to see] actually became the model for other forms of sacred visitation . . . (Rutherford, 2000: 137).

Although *theoroi* traveled in a secular capacity as official representatives of a city-state, a ‘sense of duty’ attached to the contemplation of sacred artifacts, natural features, and man-made objects (Rutherford, 2000: 139). In other words, *theoroi* were expected not only to see, but to  *dwell upon*  that which had been seen (Rutherford, 2000: 137). Such behavior aligns with McIntosh’s aforesaid understanding that pilgrimage provides ‘the opportunity for insight.’ This was a different form of looking, evocative of the Indian word *Darsán* (sacred vision), whose roots - religious insight

- and - contemplation of the sacred - are perhaps cognate with the Greek word *drus*, oak tree (Rutherford, 2000: 145; Piggott, 1985: 100). In contrast to the quotidian experiences of politicians and citizens, those of the traveling *theoroi* could symbolize the contemplative life (Rutherford 2000: 141), the leading of which would become highly valued in subsequent time periods. The embodiment of travel experiences that stimulated contemplation may very well have presaged what Greenia refers to above as the ‘longing for transformation [that] hovers as the aspirational goal of much intentional travel and certainly of all pilgrimage.’

Between the fourth and sixth centuries CE, St. Augustine’s notion of *peregrinatio* [venturing on pilgrimage; centuries later, crusade], despite his own insistence that ‘God was everywhere,’ had become so powerfully associated with sacralized topographies, that sacred mobilities arose in conjunction with them. The latter were focused on a personal sense of ritual on the one hand and an attribution of meaning to local shrines on the other (Bitton-Ashkenoly, 2005: 204-205). In this way, sites of pilgrimage and religious and linguistic landscapes became embodiments ‘of myth-history, enabling believers to re-invoke elements of their faith in words, images and physical actions’ (Coleman and Elsner, 1995: 204-5). The idea of myth-history calls to mind Pierre Nora’s concept of the *lieux de mémoire*, the ‘place myth where in one form or another the past is always present’ (Nora, 1989). To this day at such sites, visiting takes on religious significance, for ‘the tie is one of kinship, reaching back in time to proximate ancestors [and] to distant, semi-divine heroes . . .’ (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1979: 417).

Although emphasis has been placed on sacred travel and wandering in English language pilgrimage scholarship, it is worth emphasizing that, in other languages, the meaning of the word ‘pilgrimage’ lacks the same precision that it seems to convey in English. Peter Jan Margry suggests why this may be the case:

*It is possibly due to the focus in English-language pilgrimage studies on traveling, and the early medieval peregrinatio idea, that the wandering, traveling, tourism element has remained so strong in the pilgrimage concept; in contrast, in the Germanic language, concepts with clear semantic differences have developed, such as Wallfahrt und Pilgerfahrt in German and bedevaart and pelgrimage in Dutch (Margry, 2008: 44n).*

Despite discrepancies and even lively disagreements about what the word ‘pilgrimage’ embraces, one helpful historical note is that a cult of ‘special seeing’ seems to have arisen around the eighth century BCE; subsequently, it was embraced not only by the Greeks but by other ancient peoples as well. Although the sacred and the profane were not clearly distinguished at that time, there emerged an expectation that: a) the looking should be extraordinary; b) the gaze contemplative; and c) the insights shareable. Those who travel great distances in this day and age are still expected to ‘see with new eyes’ and to return, physically and symbolically, with a discernment that contrasts with that of their more sedentary fellows.

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